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# Privilege, equity, and the Advanced Placement Program: tug of war

JACK SCHNEIDER

The Advanced Placement Program is growing at a striking rate in US high schools and at the same time being abandoned by high-status schools. This paper explores the history of the Advanced Placement Program, from its roots in the 1950s as a programme for challenging high-achieving students at high-status schools, through its equity-motivated expansion in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, up to the present as it faces threats to its credibility and prestige. In so doing, it also explores the difficulty of combating inequality with school reform, particularly in light of continuing moves by privileged groups to gain a measure of distinction. In the case of the Advanced Placement Program, a greater push for equity has, ironically, incited a reaction that may, in the end, result in greater inequity.

Keywords: Advanced Placement; history of education; school-university relationships

## Introduction

The history of the Advanced Placement Program (AP)<sup>1</sup> in the US is a story about the tug-of-war between those struggling to secure equity for all and those intent on securing a measure of distinction for some. The programme was conceived of shortly after the Second World War as a way of engaging and challenging the highest-achieving students at the best US high schools. School administrators and reformers concerned with these students argued for increased academic rigour and tracking students by ability. Students, they maintained, had to be sorted and separated so that the ‘best and brightest’ could be challenged and subsequently assume leadership positions in a Cold War world in which science and diplomacy mattered more and more each day. In short, education leaders believed that not all students were created equal and that something had to be done about it.

It was not long, however, until advocates for students from less privileged backgrounds called for the expansion of AP to a wider range of schools, particularly urban public schools. While the call for equity may not have been surprising in a nation that has historically approached social reform through the schools (see Katz 1971, Cremin 1990), what was surprising was the effectiveness of this reform effort. School reformers and

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the College Board—the organization that administers AP—supported school and district administrators in their efforts to expand access beyond private and advantaged suburban schools. In 1954, only 532 students took AP tests. Fifty years later that number was 1.1 million. ‘Like cellphones, lattes and other once-elite products’, noted one commentator, AP courses ‘have become ubiquitous’ (Berger 2006). By the dawn of the 21st century, able and ambitious students at most US high schools had access to Advanced Placement and their AP-laden transcripts gave them an advantage in college and university admissions. The expansion of AP seemed a meritocratic triumph.

Despite this accomplishment, Advanced Placement may face trouble ahead if the recent actions of elite US high schools are any indication. A half-century after AP’s inception, many of the same high-status schools that participated in crafting the programme have rejected it, and, in so doing, pose a threat to the AP ‘brand’ that has served so many. So what happened? AP did not come under new leadership that dramatically changed the nature of the programme, nor did anyone at the College Board systematically offend the heads and principals of highly selective schools. In fact, most aspects of AP remained the same. It continued to function as a successful form of articulation between high schools and colleges and universities, it maintained high standards, and it offered students an opportunity to earn advanced standing in undergraduate university programmes.

However, one other point of consistency proved problematic: AP’s broad curriculum focused on preparing students for an end-of-year standardized test. Over the past few decades teachers and professional educators, particularly in high-status secondary-schools in the US, have increasingly criticized AP for its test-driven nature, for its focus on breadth over depth, and for failing to adapt to changing views about curriculum and teaching. As such, the criticism of the programme has been, at least in part, a subset of the wider critique of the growing reliance on standardized tests for measuring achievement in US education. However, until recently, those complaints were not enough to prompt schools to drop their AP programmes. Even high-status high schools remained hamstrung by the degree to which colleges and universities still accepted AP as the acme of rigour in secondary education, and rewarded it in the admissions process.

However, as AP lost its uniqueness and moved to a wider range of schools, it less effectively identified the most talented and ambitious students. As more college and university applicants submitted transcripts filled with AP courses, the credential value of AP was weakened and it became less influential in post-secondary admissions, at least among highly selective schools. Consequently, many college guidance counsellors at high-status independent and public schools, whose faculty and administrators had long expressed desires to move towards more open curricula, cleared their schools to re-evaluate AP. The result has been that while many schools in underserved communities are still playing catch-up, many of the US’s ‘best’ high schools are dropping AP entirely.

This paper will explore the history of the Advanced Placement Program, from its roots in the 1950s as a programme for challenging high-achieving students at elite schools, through its equity-motivated expansion, up to the

present as it faces threats to its credibility and prestige. In so doing, this history will also explore the difficulty of combating inequality with school reform, particularly in light of continuing moves by privileged groups to use education to gain a measure of distinction. In the case of the Advanced Placement Program, a greater push for equity has, ironically, incited a reaction that may, in the end, result in greater inequity.

## Origins

In 1950, John Kemper, the Headmaster of Phillips Andover, invited the recently-created Alumni Educational Policy Committee to consult with Andover's faculty on revising the school's curriculum. As discussions progressed, 'it became more and more evident that the real problems extended far beyond the curriculum of any one preparatory school; they paralleled problems in other schools and reached into the colleges' (*General Education in School and College* 1952: 1). Andover, working with two other high-status private secondary schools—Exeter and Lawrenceville—as well as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale universities began a project with support from the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education (FAE) to promote rigour in secondary education. Ford had created the FAE in 1951 to provide support for educational work ranging from curriculum reform to teacher training, but which primarily concerned gifted and talented students. This project fitted perfectly within the FAE's mission and soon grew to become the School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing.

Addressing the needs of the gifted and talented was particularly a concern in the context of the Cold War, which, many argued, required the so-called 'best and brightest' to meet the intellectual demands of political and scientific leadership. One major concern was challenging talented students, moving them to and through college as swiftly and as effectively as possible, and then on to graduate school or the workplace. In two studies funded by the FAE, educators recommended that high schools and colleges work together to avoid repetition in course work and to allow motivated students to work at the height of their capabilities, advancing as quickly as possible up the educational ladder (*General Education in School and College* 1952).

These concerns were not limited to the Ford Foundation. In his memoir, Bruner (1984: 179–180) recalls the passion of Cold War-era reformers 'convinced that the trouble with schools was the shoddy stuff they taught'. Such reformers believed that 'the cure was to narrow the gap between knowledge locked up in the university library or the scholar's mind and the fare being taught in the schools'. If 'an untrained teacher stood between the knowledge and the student', then it only made sense to 'bypass the teacher' (Bruner 1983: 179–180) by providing a 'teacher-proof curriculum'. The key in the approach taken by Cold War-era reformers was promoting the challenge of those who would make tangible contributions to the nation as a result of their scholarship. 'Issues of race and poverty in education', added Bruner (1983: 181), 'had not come into [reformers'] consciousness'. Two decades later, that would change dramatically.

In 1952 the School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing published an announcement, authored by Gordon Chalmers, then President of Kenyon College (School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing 1952). Chalmers wrote on behalf of the study group that had met to devise a plan for high-achieving secondary students from high-status schools to earn college and university credit while still in high school. The group, according to Chalmers, intended ‘that able school boys and girls ... proceed farther than at present in the standard studies of a liberal education’ (School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing 1954: 3). The study was led by 12 colleges and universities<sup>2</sup> and 13 secondary schools including prestigious public schools like Newton High School in Massachusetts and the Bronx High School of Science in New York City as well as private schools. Most of the high schools participating would be listed shortly thereafter by Conant (1961: 111) as ‘schools where more than 50% of the graduating class went on to college ... and where the averages of the scholastic aptitude scores of the students were higher than in most schools’.

Those who crafted the 1952 report had a number of assumptions. The study leaders wanted to ‘offer an opportunity and a challenge to ... the strongest and most ambitious boys and girls’ (School and College Study 1952: 5). However, because they believed that such advanced levels of work could ‘be done only in exceptional secondary schools, public and independent, the opportunity would only be provided to the strongest students in high-status schools (School and College Study 1952: 5–6). They also assumed that students would study advanced material and take placement tests to push themselves harder, not anticipating the use of such a programme to gain status or an advantage in college admissions. An ambitious and able student, they wrote, would ‘be able, by means of extra courses and summer work, to earn his bachelor’s degree in 3 years’ (pp. 7–8). Secondary and post-secondary education could be made more challenging, they argued, and the result would be another benefit: earlier graduation from college and entrance into graduate school or the workplace.

As a result of those assumptions, only a small group of schools offered the programme, and only the highest-achieving students were invited to participate. Given who was involved, though, AP very quickly became a mark of academic prestige. Unintended though it may have been, one of the most influential results of the creation of Advanced Placement would be the creation of a ‘branded’ curricular status symbol.

### **Buying into AP**

In the spring of 1954, 532 students in the 18 participating schools took 929 placement examinations (Valentine 1987: 84), for which their scores, graded between ‘1’ (indicating below-average understanding) and ‘5’ (indicating complete comprehension) would determine whether or not they would receive college credit. In the fall of 1955, Charles Keller became the first director of the Advanced Placement Program, which was to be administered under the care of the College Board—the same organization that ran the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), a widely used test of readiness for colleges

and universities. The first Board-sponsored testing took place in spring 1956.

At least initially, schools and students used the programme as intended: 'gifted' students sought greater challenge and, in so doing, earned college credit. As Dudley (1958: 1), the second director of AP, wrote: 'the basic philosophy of the Advanced Placement Program is simply that all students are not created equal'. Thus, the purpose of AP was to give high-achieving students at 'top' high schools, where they already had the luxury of being bound for prestigious colleges and universities, room to excel and an inducement to continue to work hard. In 1959 James Conant published *The American High School Today* (Conant 1959), applying the rhetoric of crisis to a failure of the US education system in challenging students according to ability. Conant and his supporters, who championed tracking, 'advanced' classes, and the model of the comprehensive high school, believed that an undifferentiated curriculum would allow 'the best students [to slide] through high school without enough rigorous academic work' (Hampel 1986: 59).

It was crucial, reformers like Conant believed, that this talented minority of students be well served, not simply for their own benefit, but for national security purposes. In 1957, the launching of Sputnik raised questions about the ability of the US to compete intellectually, particularly scientifically, against the Soviet Union. While legislation like the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which provided millions of dollars for the advancement of science, mathematics, and modern languages in elementary and secondary schools, did not directly influence the adoption of Advanced Placement, it did create a context in which a programme like AP looked quite appealing. The message of providing an edge to US students over their Soviet counterparts was, according to Hampel (1986: 73), quite effective, and professional educators were receptive to this rhetoric of 'academic challenge'.

Teachers leapt at the opportunity to teach AP. They could cover more challenging material at a faster pace than they could have in heterogeneous classes. There was also the feeling, as Dudley (1958: 5) noted, that 'the intellectual tone of a school is lifted by the recognition of scholastic achievement ... [and teachers] feel real satisfaction in teaching the very able and the intellectually restless'. Further, with school reformers pushing programmes like AP, teachers working with AP classes were on the cutting edge pedagogically.

However, AP had a separate and unplanned appeal for students. Increased applications for a fixed number of college and university places during the 1950s produced rising anxiety about 'the growing scarcity of "spaces", especially in the Ivy League colleges' (Gores and Barry 1956: 7).<sup>3</sup> Whereas once schools like Yale had 'treated respectfully the headmasters and directors of studies at the leading Eastern prep schools, from which Yale drew a sizable part of each freshman class in the 1940s' and each senior in those schools 'chose one and only one Ivy League school' (Hampel 1986: 33), times were changing. 'The years since 1955', wrote Richard Pearson in 1959, 'have seen pressures for competitive admission build up considerably at perhaps 100 institutions across the country and, to a lesser extent, at another 100 to 150 colleges' (Pearson 1959: 24). Many students and

parents, concerned about how to remain competitive in a process that once found places at high-status colleges and universities for all qualified applicants, saw in AP an opportunity to gain a measure of distinction.

Not everyone was pleased with the influence AP was having on schools. Less than a decade after the first AP classes were offered, Phillips Exeter faculty member Bragdon (1960), in praising the AP Program, also offered a warning, noting ‘too much emphasis on the prestige value of the advanced placement courses’. Bragdon also observed ‘a dangerous tendency to regard advanced placement teachers and students as an elite worthy of special praise’ (p. 19). The founding AP schools had intended the programme to challenge and track the brightest and most capable students. They had not, however, intended it to provide prestige and privilege for those students—a problem that leaders at the College Board, in whose *College Board Review* Bragdon’s piece appeared, seem to have recognized.

AP was also, some professional educators argued, dramatically increasing the workloads and stress levels of those perceived to be academically gifted. Writing in response to James Conant’s push for the implementation of a particular vision of rigour in schools that, among other things, strongly promoted tracking, Paul Diederich of the Educational Testing Service argued that:

there is simply too much sitting down, listening to talk, talk, talk. We say that these students ought to learn to ‘work hard’, and that they would not mind that in the least; it is the sitting down and listening all day in a space half the size of a grave that gets them down ... The teachers come out of it as scarred and tired as the students. (Hampel 1986: 66)

Despite these pedagogical concerns, AP grew quickly, with the most receptive audience for using AP as a status measure being not at schools like Exeter, which still maintained its close connections with the Ivy League universities, but among ambitious students in other schools. AP offered them a chance to prove their parity with students at elite schools and, consequently, to gain better odds of attaining admission at colleges and universities of choice. In 1961 James Conant wrote in his book *Slums and Suburbs* (Conant 1961) that the top institutions in terms of numbers of students who had taken AP courses in high school were MIT, Michigan, Stanford, Northwestern, and ‘six of the Ivy League institutions’ (p. 92). Further, at Harvard, ‘about half’ of the entering class had participated in the AP, and ‘nearly 10%’ had passed enough tests to confer 2nd-year standing. Enrolling in AP, it seemed, was the next best thing to attending an elite prep school.

Despite the resistance of school leaders and those at the College Board, the meaning and purpose of AP had begun to change. In 1956, Harold Gores and Leo Barry, superintendent of the Newton Public Schools and principal of Newton High School, respectively, wrote that it would ‘be necessary that schools and colleges not let the values inherent in the present concept of enriched courses be lost in the merely utilitarian aspects of accelerated study beyond high school’ (Gores and Barry 1956: 7). In short, Gores and Barry, who had taken part in the crafting of AP, were concerned that high-achieving students would work no harder and experience no greater

challenge in abbreviating their high school tenures, primarily seeking status in their participation. However, preserving the original meaning of the programme was a daunting task when AP's greatest appeal seemed to be becoming that it provided an edge in the college admission process. 'As pressure to get into the prestige colleges has increased', wrote Bragdon (1960: 20):

it has not taken students long to learn that college admissions officers are impressed when they see advanced placement courses on a candidate's record. The very fact of having taken such a course is as good as a 700–800 College Board Achievement Test score.

As the dean of one private college in the Midwest stated: 'Just the presence of an advanced placement course on the transcript is enough [for admission]' (Casserly 1966: 19).

Already by the late-1960s, though, there was growing equity-based criticism of AP. Moves to increase rigour were leaving 'regular' and 'slow' students behind, providing them a second-class high school education and shutting doors to post-secondary education. Addressing this critique would lead to the programme's dramatic expansion and, consequently, create a new problem for leaders at the College Board.

### Growing inequity

At the beginning of the 1960s, despite the fact that schools other than those that had participated in its design were adopting AP, the programme was still reserved for 'the wealthiest independent schools and the high schools in affluent suburbia' (Bragdon 1960: 20). Thus, AP was in a sense exacerbating inequality. Given the rhetorical connection between tracking-based rigour and national defence this had been acceptable, but a changing context would alter the way school reformers viewed AP. All students, many reformers argued, particularly those in underserved communities long denied educational equity, deserved a challenging high school education and an opportunity for a university degree.

University enrollments doubled between 1950 and 1980, and even students at the original AP high schools needed to compete for spots at, e.g. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale universities. As Thelin (2004) writes:

by about 1958 the overall rush to go to college, any college, had evolved into a rush to go to a prestigious college ... [and] institutional reputation came to be set in large part by the number and percentage of applicants a college admissions office rejected.

This, in turn, 'spawned a cottage industry of manuals offering advice on "how to get into the college of your choice"' (p. 294). Regardless of the degree to which AP actually prepared students academically, it was becoming perceived as a standard part of a demanding upper-secondary education and an impressive resume. Consequently, schools that had not adopted AP began to do so, knowing that in order to provide their graduates with access to 'better' colleges and universities they would have to offer AP. In response, many educators asserted that something needed to be done to keep college

admission open ‘to students who have no opportunity to take advanced placement courses’ (Casserly 1966: 19).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the context in which school reforms were crafted began to shift. ‘Top-flight American education had always been elitist and the democratic trends of the sixties called for better education for the many, rather than the best education for the few’ (Rothschild 1999: 185). In the mould of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programmes, public education took on ‘much of the national liberal agenda’ as school reformers engaged in ‘the vigorous pursuit of egalitarian reforms [that] promised to clarify, expand, and protect the claims of the disadvantaged’ (Hampel 1986: 137).<sup>4</sup>

AP continued to provide opportunity—for advanced study, for advanced placement, and for an advantage in university admissions—but only for those who had access to it. In 1969, only 14% of high schools had students taking AP exams, and over half of the schools that had students taking the exams had fewer than 10 doing so. When the programme was founded ‘the nation was intensely concerned about the education of gifted students’; by 1970 attention had shifted to ‘other issues like the quality of education in inner-city schools and the dehumanizing impersonality of vast educational institutions’ (Hochman 1970: 16). AP students, equity advocates observed, were primarily white. While many white children, particularly in rural areas, had no access to AP, white children who lived in suburbs or attended private schools did (Cambell and Bunnell 1963: 83). This was not the case with black children, who were largely confined to less-affluent urban schools. Consequently, ‘some people [began to] regard the programme as touched with ... “institutional racism”’ (Hochman 1970: 17).

By the mid-1970s, a number of education leaders and school reformers began to view AP as a lever for school reform in underserved communities, particularly as a means of helping students move into post-secondary institutions. With funding, some argued, AP could be ‘an effective instrument for serving gifted but socially disadvantaged students’ (Marland 1976: 44) and promoting the equity agenda. Nevertheless, it remained much more prevalent in private and suburban schools than in urban ones due to a lack of properly trained teachers in urban school systems, limited classroom space, poor academic preparation, and a lower perception of the ability of the students in those schools.

### **Expansion of the programme**

Despite sustained inequities, the AP Program continued to grow and reach more students. By 1976, 3937 schools and 75 651 students took part in AP; by 1985 there were 6720 schools and 205 650 students participating. Ironically, it was during this period of increasing expansion that discourse about rigour in teaching and curriculum, which had once justified the growth of the programme, began to change. By the 1980s, ‘uninspired instruction was an important concern of several critics keen on changing teaching methods’. Reliance on lectures, worksheets, and questioning for monosyllabic factual answers, they argued, ‘often left no time for analysis and discussion’

(Hampel 1986: 148). In his *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (1984) argued for a shift towards schools in which educators ‘involve students in a variety of ways of thinking … introduce students to concepts and not just facts … [and] provide situations that provoke and evoke curiosity’ (p. 244). What most schools needed, he argued was ‘not a somewhat lower-level replication of college courses, most of which … do little more than teach students to take notes and memorize facts’ (p. 291). This vision, representative of the thinking of a sizeable group of US educators, did not square with AP.

Yet, schools continued to promote their AP courses, and schools without AP continued to add it. The programme remained through the 1980s a way for a newly established school ‘to gain credibility with both parents and colleges’ (Riddle 2007). For one such private school in California, for instance, AP provided a ‘safety around college admissions’, as it did for many other new schools, according to the associate head of the Crossroads School (Riddle 2007). For schools expected or hoping to send all graduates to college, AP served as an accepted measure of rigour in the curriculum that colleges would instantly recognize.

Despite AP’s expansion, equity advocates still struggled to address the inequity between schools that offered the programme and those that did not. In 1986, AP students were still ‘more likely to come from homes where the parents were highly educated and [in] prominent occupations’. Further, ‘the typical AP student was likely to come from a large rather than small school and from a school with a minority enrollment of 15–49%, rather than 50% or more’. By the end of the following decade ‘the typical AP student could no longer be so easily categorized’ (Rothschild 1999: 198), even if true equity still remained more of a goal than a reality.

AP expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly among students of colour. In 1986, 7201 schools and 231 000 students took part in AP. By 1994, 11 500 schools and 458 945 students would participate—a major increase, though still a small fraction of US high school students. In 1988 minority students made up 19.5% of all students taking AP tests, and twice the number of minority students took AP tests as had in 1983, giving ‘many educators a new glimmer of hope about the minority pipeline to choice college[s]’ (Wiley 1989: 15). By 1994 minorities accounted for 26.3% of AP test-takers, marking an expansion so accelerated that AP was becoming a standard aspect of US secondary education, whether public or private, elite or otherwise.

AP grew as individual schools and local school districts recognized the usefulness of the programme, but it also was heavily promoted from the outside. In the 1980s and 1990s the “natural”, self-catalytic growth [of AP, was] supplemented by state-wide plans to use AP as part of general educational improvement’ (Hanson 1985: 11). The states of West Virginia and Arkansas, for example, legislated that all high schools offer a minimum number of AP courses. California initiated grants to increase and support the AP Program in California and to make AP courses available online to students (Zarate and Pachon 2006).<sup>5</sup> In the 1998–1999 school year, the US federal government spent \$2.7m subsidizing AP examination fees for low-income students and professional development for AP teachers from low-income districts.

Other incentive programmes for minorities to take the AP were developed in a number of underserved communities. The O'Donnell Foundation, for instance, began in 1995 to financially reward students and subsidize the test administration costs for those in the Dallas, TX, Independent School District, which at the time had a 93% minority population. Similar subsidization would later be pursued by the state of Texas itself, as well as a number of other states (Hurwitz and Hurwitz 2003, Santoli 2003). This push to funnel students into AP stemmed from the belief that 'taking an AP course signals to college and university admissions officers that a student is prepared for college level work' (Klopfenstein 2004: 5), an accepted truism that had until the turn of the century not been questioned, and remains the conventional wisdom in many circles. Between 1990 and 2000, the Advanced Placement Program exploded, with the number of high schools participating increasing by 40%.

### **Declining prestige**

One unintended but foreseeable consequence of the expansion of AP has been a declining level of prestige and achievement associated with the programme. Nearly 750 000 students took 1.25m AP exams in 2000. Only 4 years later, those numbers had skyrocketed to 1.1m students taking 1.85m exams (Lowenstein 2005: 43). The popularity of AP has brought about a great demand for it, and, in meeting that demand, educators and reformers have weakened the status of AP in high-status high schools.

In part, this is because there can only be a limited number of high-status schools, while anyone who performs well can earn high marks on the AP test.<sup>6</sup> However, not all schools can be high-status, and those that wish to be must scramble to distinguish themselves and their curricula from others. Expansion of AP has consequently brought about uncertainty regarding its connection to elite education—is AP a mark of a 'top' school or the mark of an average one?

Critics have also raised questions about the credibility of AP. In part, these questions can be attributed to a shift in accepted wisdom about quality teaching and challenging curricula. A number of elite schools have pursued John Goodlad's vision of programmes that develop modes of thought and provoke curiosity among students. Choate Rosemary Hall, for instance, offers 'World history: A thematic approach' in which 'the development of skills used by historians—critical reading, writing, and oral presentation—is emphasized' (Choate Rosemary Hall n.d.). At Deerfield Academy (2007), history courses stress the development of reasoning and logic in students. Courses there aim to 'sharpen students' judgement in the selection, organization, and discussion of the important facts and ideas of the past', and 'give students practical experience as young historians'. While the AP history exams, for instance, do have a section that asks test-takers to write essays using historical documents, many schools want more than AP provides.

Questions about the quality of AP can also be attributed to an actual watering-down effect of allowing more and more students into AP classes. Whereas once 'a student earning a 5 in an AP class from a public high school

in an economically modest district took the same test as a Choate student whose parents face an annual tuition bill of more than \$35 000' (Shanahan 2005: 20), the push for equity has also resulted in an increase of students taking the class but not the exam—by some estimates, up to one-third of all AP enrollees (Commission on the Future of the Advanced Placement Program 2001)—or taking a class that is markedly different from the AP class taught at, say, Choate. As one school leader noted, 'I have taken "elite" status off of AP. It's open access: We don't keep anyone out who wants to enter' (Dodd 2005: 21). However, while expansion of AP has meant greater opportunities for many, it has also raised questions about quality.

Enrolment in AP classes, which was once 'a reasonable barometer of academic ability' (Ewers 2005), is no longer as effective as a signalling device for colleges and universities as it once was. Klopfenstein and Thomas (2005: 1) have found that:

after controlling for the balance of a student's high school curriculum, family, and school characteristics, AP students are generally no more likely than non-AP students to return for a second year of college or to have higher first semester grade point averages.

Klopfenstein and Thomas attributed these findings, in part, to the rapid expansion of the programme, which has diluted its selectivity. Another explanation offered is that 'in response to pressure, many schools are simply renaming existing courses "Advanced Placement"' (p. 15). There is a third factor to consider: because AP exams are criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced, an increased number of students taking the tests has resulted in more scores in the 3–5 range on college applications (College Board 1999), decreasing the credential value of such scores. Universities, at least high-status institutions with the luxury of rejecting students with strong academic records, can no longer depend on AP to identify the highest-ability students (Geiser and Santelices 2004, Klopfenstein and Thomas 2005). Even if AP is, as some suggest (Morgan and Ramist 1998, Camara *et al.* 2000, Dodd 2005, Shea 2005), a high-quality programme, its prestige has declined.

Selective colleges and universities have adapted by raising the bar for students wishing to receive course credit. Even though two-thirds of test-takers earn a score of 3 or higher on the 1–5 scale, only 49% currently receive college credit based on AP examination scores (Lichten 2000). Harvard, an early proponent of AP, no longer gives course credit for scores below 5, whereas once a score of 3 had qualified. The University of Pennsylvania no longer allows students to use AP credits to satisfy general undergraduate graduation requirements. And, at highly selective universities like Stanford, Yale, Cornell, Virginia, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, departments are less willing to let students with scores of 4 or 5 skip courses (Ganeshanathan 2000, Lichten 2000, Pappano 2007). According to Terrel Rhodes of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, institutions of higher education have made this move because 'high school-age students are not mature enough to grasp the subtleties of some material' (Pappano 2007). Yet, for decades the assumption was that if they were enrolled in AP courses, students were mature enough to do university-level

coursework in high school. The problem, according to some researchers, may not be related to maturity, but rather to the fact that college students with AP coursework under their belts often fail to outperform their non-AP peers (Klopfenstein and Thomas 2005, Sadler and Tai 2006).

The College Board has responded by tightening standards, asking schools to include specific elements in their AP syllabi, ‘or to demonstrate how they are meeting colleges’ standards without including such elements’ (Shanahan 2005: 20). Beginning in the 2007–2008 school year, high schools offering AP classes were required to seek authorization from the College Board to use the AP label, with colleges receiving a list of approved high schools. High schools seeking approval ‘have to fill out two-page “audit” forms that list certain elements that courses must include ... [and] teachers will have to attach their syllabi, a sample assignment and a sample test’ (Chaker 2005). The College Board, however, is careful to note that ‘the audit does not review anything about teachers beyond how they are demonstrating on their syllabi the inclusion of the course requirements or a viable alternative’ (College Board 2007), anticipating reluctance on the part of teachers to be closely monitored by outside authority.

The College Board’s attempt to tighten restrictions on what can and cannot be labelled AP may be effective in maintaining the standard of the AP curriculum. That alone, however, may not be enough to control damage to the AP brand or resolve questions about whether or not the AP curriculum can be aligned with current best-practices in teaching and curriculum development. Nor will it address the fact that, as it has expanded, AP has lost its exclusivity. And, while exclusivity is clearly not the College Board’s goal, any significant decline in the status of the AP brand will have significant consequences for the Board’s goal of providing a widely accepted, rigorous curriculum to students across different high schools.

### **Moves for change?**

Complaints about AP’s pedagogy are nothing new, particularly among faculty in high-status high schools. However, as long as colleges continued to recognize AP as the apex of university-preparatory curricula, no school could afford to drop the programme. However, as AP has expanded, its prestige has declined, freeing particular schools to pursue alternatives to AP.

While many teachers, particularly those at lower-status schools, no doubt felt positively about AP and the chance to teach more challenging material, many faculties at high-status high schools had complained for decades about the constraints imposed by the AP curriculum. Education reformers had also been making arguments that AP courses were ‘too focused on learning a battery of facts to pass the Advanced Placement exam instead of tackling fewer subjects in-depth in a research paper’ (Sacchetti 2006). Even teachers who remained positive about AP noted that ‘the class to a large degree is “test-driven”. [Students] must have comprehensive knowledge of the subject, but they also need test-taking skills in the multiple-choice and essay sections’ (Oberjuerge 1999: 265). According to the assistant principal at one wealthy suburban public school that has recently

dropped AP—‘the test unfortunately drives what ... and how you teach’ (Berger 2006). Such a narrow test-preparation aim, wrote one former AP student, ‘stifled the development of the skills, capacities, and habits of mind’ (Neutuch 1999: 245). In short, members of a number of school communities felt that they could simply do better than AP.

This is not to say that all schools could do better. In the absence of the AP Program, many students would no doubt have similar experiences in the classroom, memorizing and drilling rather than practising the skills of young historians or mathematicians or scientists. High-status high schools, however, can use their resources to their advantage, adapting to a rising tide of best-practice literature promoting depth over breadth, the teaching of skills over discrete facts, and the development of passion alongside ability (National Research Council 1999). And yet, until quite recently, even highly selective schools continued offering AP, and their ambitious students continued enrolling as long as colleges continued to reward students having taken AP courses.

However, perception of AP had begun to change. The programme had expanded so rapidly at the end of the century that some colleges and universities, concerned with questions about the credibility of the programme, began to re-evaluate the practice of giving preference in the admissions process to those who completed AP coursework. Further, as of 2000, ‘the general level of selectivity and [criteria regarding] test scores’ among 4-year private universities, ‘were higher than they had been previously’ (Breland *et al.* 2002)—an indication that more students were exhibiting strong academic coursework and test performance than they had previously. Simply put, having AP on one’s transcript no longer provided the measure of distinction it once did. At Stanford University in 2000, more than half of freshmen entered with at least 10 college credits earned through AP or International Baccalaureate (Ganeshanathan 2000). At Northwestern University, over 90% of incoming freshmen in 2006 had received AP credit.

As AP continued to expand, leaders at high-status high schools began discussing the weaknesses of the programme more frequently and more seriously. No independent school leader, wrote Hager (2006: 2) of Concord Academy, ‘can attend an educational meeting without running into conflict and contention about the AP ... [specifically] whether AP is the best we can do’. Concord Academy’s faculty members, she added, ‘are convinced that they can engage students in much deeper learning if they create their own curricula’ (p. 3), leaving AP to ‘chronically underfunded communities’ (p. 2). Other schools explored the possibility of dropping AP by contacting admissions offices at schools that their graduates most frequently attended. One independent school surveyed 200 colleges and universities nationwide, and were ‘assured by 90% of them that [their] students would not be penalized for taking advanced courses that diverged from the AP curriculum’ (Landsberg and Rathi 2005).

Colleges and universities were similarly supportive of Concord Academy’s move to drop AP, ‘especially because [in doing so, Concord Academy] is in excellent company with other strong independent schools’ (Hager 2006: 4). Admissions offices and faculties understand ‘that master high school teachers can reach talented students more rigorously than the Advanced Placement

program suggests'. Hager added that 'college officials enthusiastically support our efforts in their admissions decisions and increasingly in policies that de-emphasize the AP test scores' (p. 4).

Seeing that their students would be accorded status in the college admissions process regardless of their enrolment status in AP, other elite high schools have cut their emphasis on AP. Many have moved away from AP entirely. Others have created 'homegrown courses that are more like college work in tone and depth but may still cover AP material so students are positioned for the exam' (Pappano 2007). Such schools, 'which enjoy an enviable reputation among admissions officers at elite colleges', have the privilege not only of having these debates, but of making independent decisions (Landsberg and Rathi 2005). However, not all schools do.

Even though elite schools have begun backing away from it, AP has continued to grow each year, with a majority of that growth coming in low- and middle-income schools. While AP is no longer the zenith of academic challenge, many schools still benefit from the programme. Best-practice literature may promote developing modes of thinking and provoking curiosity, but the past two decades have ushered in an era of standards and high-stakes testing for US public schools, particularly affecting high schools in low-income and minority communities. Because these schools stand to lose funding if they fail to adequately prepare students to meet tests of basic skills, the concept of advanced challenge can often be lost in the fray. In that context, the AP curriculum represents a welcome addition.

Additionally, while AP may no longer carry much distinction on transcripts from private, high-status high schools, it does carry weight on transcripts of students at poorly-funded public high schools. When course quality is questionable, AP provides a baseline of substance and rigour. The process of preparing for that can be among the most substantial critical reading and writing work done in some schools (Wineburg 2006).<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, public school reformers in underserved districts have encouraged students interested in pursuing post-secondary education to enrol in AP classes. In one community, for instance, the superintendent of schools has made AP enrolment 'open', with the aim of pushing participation in the district towards 100%: 'Who is most likely to reap long-term benefits from AP classes? Those most likely to struggle in college, the very ones often relegated to second-class status in their high schools' (Riley 2005). AP may not be cutting-edge, but it still provides an important advantage for some students in the college admissions process, particularly in applying to lower-status institutions. More importantly, many students in AP classes get the basic skills and the basic challenge they need—a positive outcome, though one quite distinct from the original purpose of Advanced Placement.

Teachers at underserved schools also have reasons to hang on to AP. For many teachers, attending AP Summer Institutes and the annual scoring of AP tests represents their most thorough professional development opportunity of the year. Working with other teachers from the same subject area gives often isolated teachers the chance to share teaching techniques, discipline knowledge, and curricular materials. To the extent that the AP brand still carries weight with students, 'AP' can make it easier for teachers to

arouse motivation. To the extent that AP still carries weight with colleges, the label can give teachers a sense of purpose that they are not providing a second-rate education for their students, but one that is nationally recognized and respected.

Even though they are aware of high-status schools dropping the programme, many ‘strong’ public and private high schools still cling to AP for the status it can provide them. According to Caldwell (2007), associate head at Moorestown Friends School,<sup>8</sup> schools that have moved away from AP ‘already have near perfect reputations with elite colleges’. Schools like Moorestown, still ‘have to present the most rigorous face possible, including outside benchmarking, to elite colleges in order to give kids the best chance possible of admittance’. Despite some faculty resistance, Moorestown is sticking with AP. However, four of its competitors—all Quaker schools in the Philadelphia area—have recently dropped the programme.

The most prestigious high schools, meanwhile, have the freedom to do what they want—something as true today as it was true in 1950 when they created what was to become AP. The result has been a new, though still nascent form of educational inequity in which some students are more challenged, experience more freedom, and are more favoured by colleges than others. According to one student, not having AP classes ‘means that you get to learn for the sake of learning’ (Lewin 2006: 24). Ironically, learning only for the sake of learning and without the promise of university credit or the challenge of the year-end examination was precisely the condition that sparked interest in the concept of advanced placement half-a-century earlier. And, while AP still serves a purpose at many schools, one must wonder how useful it would continue to be if all elite secondary schools dropped it and the brand were to lose credibility.

## Conclusion

The Advanced Placement Program was designed for high-achieving students at high-status schools in the US as part of an effort to create an academic elite. In the era of the Cold War, administrators at high-status high schools supported AP as part of their duty to challenge the best and brightest and, in so doing, create better leaders. The programme gained traction with teachers who had the privilege of teaching groups of talented and motivated students; in a sense, they got to be university faculty, teaching courses for the university-bound that would earn university credit. And, in an era of increasingly competitive university admission, students flocked to AP as a way to distinguish themselves from their peers. Shortly thereafter, schools beyond the original adopters began to institute AP as a means of strengthening their curricula and adjusting to what was widely perceived as pedagogically appropriate. By the early 1960s, AP was the mark of a highly-competitive high school.

In an effort to bring equity to underserved schools, reformers and educators, with the co-operation of the College Board, pushed for the expansion of AP. They were successful in their efforts, and AP quickly branched out of private and suburban public schools, taking root in schools

serving high-percentage-minority and low-income populations. By 2002, 31% of AP students identified themselves as ‘minorities’, compared to 12% in 1979 and virtually none at the outset of the programme. However, that move took time, and in that time perceptions of best pedagogical practice changed. Further, as the AP circle grew wider and wider, it signalled elite education to universities less effectively. This decline in status, along with changing ideas about great teaching, created a new context for dialogue about AP within elite schools where faculty and staff had long expressed discontent with AP’s prescribed curriculum and uneven balance of breadth and depth. Free to rethink their association with the programme, some of the highest-status schools began to move away from AP.

So what? So what if the highest-status schools pull out, as long as AP still works for some? The problem is equity. If history is any indication, AP will likely continue to persist in most US high schools for some time, particularly in schools for the underserved, many of which are still struggling to establish AP courses. At the same time, high-status, ‘elite’ schools will continue moving away from AP, finding new ways to distinguish themselves. As they do, they may fatally undermine the credibility of the AP label. What gave AP weight, after all, was the fact that it was endorsed by the US’s highest-status high schools and was the same no matter what a school’s population looked like. However, if it is not good enough for them, will colleges and universities still reward students with AP on their transcripts, or will students have to rely on the widely varying reputations of their schools? Will AP still motivate teachers and students, or will it become just another packaged curriculum?

Advanced Placement, like many other promising school reforms in the US designed to address inequities in education, has failed to level the playing field. However, these inequities are not the fault of the AP. High status is accorded to a distinct few who manage to differentiate themselves from others, and schools with the greatest resources are in a position to move quickly to align themselves with status-bearing standards. Those with fewer resources, responding more slowly, may also achieve that desired alignment, but, as they do, the well-off will move to the next rung of the status ladder, repeatedly leaving the masses behind. AP has spread rapidly as a result of the competitive nature of US education. In the coming decades, it may fail for the same reason.

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### Notes

1. The Advanced Placement Program is overseen by the College Board, which certifies high school courses that wish to use the AP label. AP offers 37 high school courses across 22 subject areas, which are standardized by an end-of-year exam administered by the

- Educational Testing Service and scored on a scale of 1–5. Many US colleges and universities award course credit for AP scores above 3, and frequently recognize high school students who have done AP coursework as having sought greater curricular challenge.
2. For example, Brown University, Haverford College, MIT, and Swarthmore College.
  3. The Ivy League is an athletic conference comprising eight private universities in the northeastern US: Brown; Columbia; Cornell; Harvard; Princeton; Yale; the University of Pennsylvania; and Dartmouth College. The term is most commonly used to refer to those eight schools considered as a group. The term also has connotations of academic excellence, selectivity in admissions, and a reputation for social elitism.
  4. One example of that effort was the federal Pell Grant, created in a 1972 amendment to the 1964 Higher Education Act, which granted funds to students enrolling as full-time undergraduates. In order to use such government financial support, however, students would first have to be admitted.
  5. This was part of the settlement of a legal action, Daniel *et al.* vs State of California, filed by the Southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of students with unequal access to AP courses,
  6. The journalist and AP advocate Mathews (1998) defines ‘elite’ high schools, at least among the 21 000 public schools in the US, as ‘the top 10%’ of high schools, which currently have status based on their relationships with college recruiters who ‘decide which schools are going to have records of achievement that impress parents and taxpay-ers’ (p. 6).
  7. The AP history tests, for example, may be loaded with multiple-choice questions for which students need only recall bits of information, but it also asks them to analyse documents and write short essays.
  8. A highly competitive regional (but not national) independent school.

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